

Maximizing Personnel and Expertise: Fire Support in the Infantry  
Battalion

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Maximizing Personnel and Expertise: Fire Support in the Infantry  
Battalion

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Based on the artillery officer's training and understanding of indirect surface fire systems, they are better suited than infantry officers to fill the role as the fire support team (FiST) leader and the battalion fire support coordinator (FSC). The Marine Corps is currently in a state of transition, increasingly focused on getting back to its expeditionary nature. In this time of transition the Corps must examine how personnel are being utilized in the war-fighting discipline that is viewed as its greatest attribute, the application of combined arms. The question must be asked: "who is best suited to coordinate fire support assets? Is it the infantry officer or the artillery officer?"

## **THE DILEMMA**

Through out the Marine Corps the personnel prescribed to fill the role of the FSC is inconsistent. At the division level, the FSC is the supporting artillery regimental commander.<sup>1</sup> At the regimental level, the fire support coordinator is the supporting artillery battalion commander or his command representative, generally a senior artillery major.<sup>2</sup> At the tank

battalion and light armor reconnaissance battalion, the FSC is also an artillery officer. However, at the infantry battalion and company the resident FSC is an infantry officer. It is inconsistent that the artillery officer is required to be the FSC at tank battalion, light armor reconnaissance battalion, the infantry regiment and the infantry division, but, not at the infantry battalion and company.

A serious gap exists in the progression of the of the artillery officer as an FSC. The first place that an artillery officer serves as the FSC is at the regimental level. That officer has no experience at the lower levels, which contradicts the progression of responsibility that is inherent with in the Marine Corps. It is contradictory that the artillery officer is the FSC at the infantry regiment and division, and not at the battalion and company. In order to understand the inconsistency of personnel manning the fire supporter role at the infantry battalion and company, it is necessary to look at a historical example to see why the FSC and FiST leader are now filled by infantry officers rather than artillery officers.

#### **HISTORICAL PRECEDENT**

At the beginning of Vietnam, artillery officers served as FSC's for infantry battalions. However, during the Vietnam War, the inability of the artillery community to support the infantry battalions with expertise in fire support caused the infantry community to look within itself to find someone to fill the role as the FSC.<sup>3</sup> In January 1996, in a Marine Corps Gazette article titled "Anatomy of an Idea" Cols John P. Glasgow and David W. Haughey, USMC (Ret.) state: "Inexperience and inattention to warfighting priorities on the part of the artillery community led to the subsequent designation of the weapons company commander as the battalion FSC."<sup>4</sup> The result of the artillery community's inability to place qualified artillery officers in a crucial role has resulted in a lack of integration between artillery and infantry at the battalion and company level. As it currently stands integrated training between infantry battalions and artillery units occurs only on Marine Expeditionary Units and at pre-deployment training conducted at Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command in 29 Palms, California.

#### **ROLES OF PERSONNEL**

Some of the duties of the FSC are to advise the commander on fire support, prepare estimates of supportability, and prepare the fire support plan.<sup>5</sup> The duties of the weapons company commander are to provide the battalion commander with "fire support coordination, medium mortar, anti-mechanized assault and heavy machinegun support for the infantry battalion and its subordinate elements."<sup>6</sup> An infantry officer is qualified because of his training and experience to be the subject matter expert in the employment of weapons company assets. He can provide estimates of supportability, and prepare a support plan for the weapons company assets, because he is the subject matter expert.

An artillery officer with equivalent time in service has a thorough understanding of fire support assets and their capabilities by virtue of his training and experience. He can provide more accurate estimates of supportability, as it relates to artillery and prepare a fire support plan and advise the commander more effectively about the use of combined arms and the true capabilities of artillery. The weapons company commander can not provide an accurate estimate of supportability for artillery, just as the artillery officer can not provide accurate estimates of supportability for weapons company.

The same is also true at the company level with the FiST leader. The weapons platoon commander should provide the same level of expertise to the company commander in regards to light

mortars, anti-mechanized assault and machinegun support.

Likewise, an artillery officer with the same time in service should provide a better level of understanding of fire support integration for the supported maneuver commander, because it is his area of expertise. However, a break down has occurred here.

The problem is that currently, no one filling the fire support coordinator role at the infantry battalion or company is a subject matter expert in fire support. It is not the fault of the infantry officers for not being an expert in fire support, their foundation is not fires, it is maneuver. Fire support for the weapons company commander and the weapons platoon commander is not his primary focus but more of a collateral duty. That is not the case for the artillery officer. The artillery officer's foundation is fires. For the artillery officer the application of fire support is a full-time responsibility, not a collateral billet.

The infantry has a valid argument against having artillery officers serve as the battalion FSC and company FiST leaders, because there hasn't been an artillery officer in the battalion FSC and artillery units generally send their most junior lieutenants to be forward observers (FO). Not many battalion commanders want an artillery officer to show up just before an exercise or a deployment to be the FSC. Nor would a company commander want a junior FO with no battery experience to be his

advisor on all matters pertaining to fire support. In neither case would the artillery officer have any established credibility with the commander. This problem of credibility has been further exacerbated by the artillery community sending its junior officers with the least amount of experience to do the most important job, support the infantry.

Certainly the infantry officer is capable of filling the role of the FSC and the FiST leader. Those who say that the current manning of fire support billets has worked this long, it shouldn't be changed have a valid argument. Most would agree that the current solution is working. However, if an opportunity to improve the existing structure of fire support coordination billets, and the integration of supporting arms with infantry arises, then that should be done. The priority for all Marines should not be to rely on precedence but rather to seek to effectively integrate the elements of the MAGTF.

## **SOLUTION**

Several solutions have been suggested to solve this issue of artillery officers filling fire support billets at the infantry battalion and company, all of which are very similar. Almost all of the proposed plans state that the artillery community as a whole must change its mindset regarding the FO billet. A new



artillery lieutenant should first serve in the battery as a fire direction officer (FDO), and then possibly as an assistant executive officer / guns platoon commander (AXO) and then as the executive officer (XO). After two years in the battery, the last year of that officer's three year tour should be spent as a permanently assigned FO to an infantry battalion. A similar proposal would work well for the FSC at the infantry battalion as well. A pre-command or post command captain or junior major could fill the role as the FSC for a year. This would allow the artillery captain with three-year orders a year to command a battery, a year to fill a staff billet within the artillery battalion and a year to fill an FSC billet at an infantry battalion.

The argument remains what would that lieutenant FO or the captain FSC do when not training on fire support. What would their role be other wise? The answer is simple:

The artillery officer would learn just as much from the infantry as they would pose to teach. There has recently been an issue to the relevancy that artillery can offer to the infantry. By spending a year with the infantry the artillery community would gain valuable knowledge as to how it can support the infantry.<sup>7</sup>

Close integration where company grade artillery officers are assigned with the infantry for a total of two years would truly integrate fire support and maneuver.

This model for integration may be an effective but the infantry may question. "What should be done with the weapons company commander at the battalion and the weapons platoon commander at the company who used to fill the roles as fire support coordinators?" The answer to that would be that those individuals could now focus fully on employing the assets under their command. With an artillery FO permanently assigned to the infantry company, the weapons platoon commander could become a true subject matter expert on the employment of 60mm mortars, for example. The mortar section which is often an after thought in planning could become a true force multiplier with proper direction and supervision of the weapons platoon commander. The same could be applied for the weapons platoon machine guns as well as the anti-mechanized weapons. By freeing up the weapons platoon commander, the company commander can place a lieutenant at a key point of friction and maximize that company's largest and most deadly assets. The same principle would also apply for the weapons company commander in regards to the weapons company assets. If the weapons company commander is not tied to the COC serving as the FSC, than he can move to points of friction during the fight and ensure that the weapons company assets are being used to the fullest extent.

Another advantage to having artillery officers serve in the fire support coordination billets in the infantry battalion is

that of increased flexibility. In the current operating environment there has been a growing trend to employ weapons company as a fourth maneuver company. By not having the weapons company commander tied down to the COC as the FSC, the transition to employing a fourth maneuver company can be done without gapping any billets inside the FSCC. Again, the same would apply at the company level. A fourth maneuver platoon can be employed without any degradation of the FiST. This flexibility can only be attained by having an artillery officer filling the fire support roles at the battalion and company.

### **CONCLUSION**

Artillery officers are the most qualified fire supporters and should be filling the fire support coordinator role from the company level up to the Division level. Marine artillery exists to support maneuver. If that is indeed the reason for artillery's existence it is time for manning priorities to reveal that. If the Marine Corps is truly concerned with employing the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) to its fullest extent, then the most qualified personnel must fill the role as fire supporter. It is time to stop settling for mediocre integration and start looking for the best solution, in order to truly integrate the MAGTF. The Marine Corps must stop

looking at tradition and precedent for the basis filling fire support billets.

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<sup>1</sup>United States Marine Corps, MCWP 3-16, *Fire Support Coordination for the Ground Combat Element* (Washington DC, 2002), 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> MCWP 3-16, 1-4.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Leuhrs, "For the Strength of the Pack is the Wolf," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Dec 2000, ?.

<sup>4</sup>Leuhrs, 26.

<sup>5</sup>MCWP 3-16, 1-7.

<sup>6</sup>Leuhrs, 26.

<sup>7</sup>Goodell, Jeffery D, "Place the Right Man in the Right Position" *EWS Contemporary Issue Paper*, Feb 20, 2004, 7.